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Poetic Reactions

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Poetic Reactions

Cover Page Footnote

The author remains deeply grateful for the opportunity as a Rice University undergraduate to take a poetry course from Susan Wood.

Poetic Reactions

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Dogs Know

A dog-eared *College Mathematics Journal* lies
open to a paper called
“Do dogs know calculus?”
where the author’s canine travels land
and water to reach most quickly
the ball thrown
into Lake Michigan.

I don’t live near a lake –
I don’t know
if my dog knows calculus, but I suspect . . .

My dog knows algebra, making
series between me
and the door I head for
to take him
for our morning walk.

My dog knows statistics,
sniffing out trends
in data left
on lawns.

My dog knows probability by following me,
knowing food
most likely
falls from me.

My dog knows geometry, solving
the packing problem
when there’s at most
one place to join the whole
family on the TV couch.

My dog knows trigonometry, tracking
periodic rhythms
of moon
and heart.

50–50

In print, the magazine editor muses, “Every time
I board a plane, I assume my chances
are 50-50: either
the plane lands safely, or it doesn’t.”

There it is again – the common
misconception that
outcomes must be
equally
likely.

I could blame
his teachers and textbooks
stuck in stale symmetry:
quarters, cards, dice.

Now my choice:
either I make
a teachable moment
or I don’t.

I decide
to ask that editor if he is just
as quick to apply
his view to rare events
deemed delightful,
like winning the lottery,
finding one’s soulmate,
and world peace.

What is the chance I will find myself
reflecting on sages who say most
of us live
a 50-50 life,
spiritual scales
in equipoise between
merit and sin,
awaiting
our next choice?

(A student comes to terms with) the ‘M word’...

I.

MATHEMATICS

Meteorologist’s Mild,
Measuring
Money Markets,
Mortgages,
Microsoft Motherboards.

MATHEMATICS

Military
Megaton
Missiles
Misguided.

MATHEMATICS

Mathematize
Metastasize
Median Mortality Models.

MATHEMATICS

Myopic Monastic
Medieval
Manmade.

MATHEMATICS

Mercator Map Misleading
Manipulating
Mechanical
Menial
Monotone
Memorizing, Mimicking:
Mindless
Meaningless Merciless
Mean.

MATHEMATICS

Mandatory Meticulous
Midterm
Magnifies
Manic Minutes:
Murky
Messy
Misstep Mistake
Minus
Mark:
Mediocre.

II.

MATHEMATICS

Mentor

Mollifies

Misconceived

Myths.

Metacognition:

Moderate

Mediate

Meditate

Modulate

Motivate

Momentum,

Moving. . .

MATHEMATICS

Magnanimous

Magnificent

Majesty Manifest

Myriad Mysteries

Mozart Melodies

Mandelbrot Mountains

Mollusk-shells

Moth-wings

Mud-cracks

Moon-tides

Mesopotamian

Multiplication

Multiplicities

Metaphysics

Modus-tollens

Maneuvering

Mastering

Meritorious

Marvelous

MATHEMATICS

Postscript

Some of my poems (and songs, for that matter) have real-world origins that turn mathematical, some have mathematical inspirations that spill into the real world, and some meet in the middle. One poem [7] was inspired by playing around with the smallest dataset with nonzero entries that I had identified [11] as illustrating Simpson's paradox, and another [9] by playing with permutations. One poem [8] was inspired by conducting a mathematics education research interview, one [12] by reading a book [2] on the life of Georg Cantor, and one [10] by accepting the challenge of Grownney to write a 26-word acrostic poem as she did with her poem "ABC" [5].

In this issue of *JHM*, I present a new set of poetic reactions. "Dogs Know" takes the mathematical question posed by [14] (and engaged by [1, 13, 15]) as a point of departure to describe my experience as owner of a Xoloitzcuintli named Kelev. The "50-50" poem was conceived when my knowledge about equiprobability bias [6] was activated by a comment I came across in the editor's column [16] of a (non-mathematical) literary magazine.

The third poem in this new set is a poetic reaction to a performance art monologue [4] by Philadelphia-based psychotherapist/dancer/songwriter/performer Judy Freed from her one-woman show *Food Fight*, an exploration of ambivalent feelings some people have connected with food. In a similar vein, there are some students whose past experiences (e.g., [3]) result in their arriving to our courses with emotional baggage or limited views of our beautiful subject. And so Freed's piece consisting entirely of "F words" inspired me to write an extended poem using only "M words" to describe such a student's feelings and create a positive resolution. More generally, the existence of such students arguably further demonstrates the desirability of a more humanistic view of mathematics and its instruction.

Acknowledgment

The author remains deeply grateful for the opportunity as a Rice University undergraduate to take a poetry seminar course from Susan Wood.

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